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**Suffolk can — and must — do more to revive once-thriving shellfish industry**

by [Greg Blass](#) May 9, 2016, 6:16 am

To follow our recent discussion of agriculture in our area, let's consider a vital but slowly growing component known as aquaculture.

Suffolk County's "Shellfish Aquaculture Lease Program" seems quite impressive, but is unwittingly designed to go nowhere. As long as it continues in its present form, the shellfish industry in the Peconic Bay region will never reach its full potential.

First of all, the state law that Suffolk County and New York State jointly adopted a few years ago limits the bay bottoms that may be leased in the Peconics to a total of 600 acres. Think of that – of the bay bottoms in the entire Peconic Estuary, over 110,000 acres in all, only 600 acres are eligible for leasing for aquaculture.

This 600-acre limit on leases has not been reached yet. The county has until the year 2020 to lease out that amount. They have barely reached half of that to date. This highlights another problem with the aquaculture program, to wit: little is done to encourage aquaculture lease applications. Applications are accepted for only two months out of the year, owing to unfounded concerns that a flood of applications would overwhelm the county if accepted all year. Clearly, the county could and should do better.

Local, county and state government ought to work much harder to encourage applications for leases. A 5- or 10-acre lease, for up to 10 years, will cost a shellfish farmer about \$250 each year in rent. According to the Marine Science Laboratory at Cooperative Extension, which provides classroom and field instruction in aquaculture to a beginner, a bay bottom farm requires about \$5,000 for equipment, and less if one already has a boat. Marketable shellfish can be harvested within two years of setting up. The whole process is outlined in both Suffolk County and Cooperative Extension aquaculture websites. Yet promotion of aquaculture barely goes beyond these websites, which partly explains how few applications there have been.

Indeed, the whole concept of an underwater lease program to grow shellfish had a controversial start here. Commercial fishermen and baymen balked at the setting aside of any acreage. Historically, they have been at the forefront of our region's once-thriving shellfish industry.

The shellfish industry still has quite a place in the Long Island economy. In 2014 alone, according to the Suffolk County Office of Economic Development, the entire Long Island region's waters yielded 346,400 bushels of oysters, clams (hard, soft and razor), scallops, mussels and whelk. The commercial value of that year's harvest was more than \$22.3 million, and 2015's figures are expected to increase. But we can and should do much better than that.

Existing aquaculture leases elsewhere do play a significant role in this. Oyster Bay Harbor, far smaller in size than the Peconics, has enjoyed a thriving lease program for aquaculture covering 1,500 acres. When established there, baymen's and commercial fishing companies' objections were considered and addressed in a balanced fashion. An interesting advantage for that area (Teddy Roosevelt's turf, by the way – we'll get back to him in a minute) is that they have but one municipality, the Town of Oyster Bay, to make things happen for aquaculture. The town governments here as well have the future of aquaculture their hands.

Suffolk County, on the other hand, cannot act as one municipality when it comes to aquaculture in the Peconic Estuary because of the multiple, contiguous town and village governments, with boards of councilpersons and separate boards of trustees who, by design or neglect, show a seemingly ho-hum interest in aquaculture.

The 600-acre limitation in the Peconics for the Suffolk County Aquaculture Lease program is a fact which speaks for itself. Six hundred acres out of a total Peconic Estuary of 110,000 acres, even taking into consideration those areas closed to shellfishing due to excessive bacteria, is comparable to a postage stamp.

As our bays' water quality continues each year to deteriorate, the many benefits of shellfish farming simply float away. The more aquaculture we have, the more "bi-valve filtration" will occur, where each shellfish draws in bay water, and releases it with far less nitrogen. The harvested shellfish, even after filtering nitrogen, are still quite edible, and when removed and replaced in farming, continue this filtration cycle. It is when shellfish also filter e-coli bacteria in addition to nitrogen that they are inedible.

Anything that removes nitrogen, even some of it, is greatly needed in our bays to discourage the perilous algae blooms known as brown tide. Brown tide last occurred in the Peconics in 1995 — but only last year in Great South Bay, another area with barely any aquaculture. In fact, Great South Bay is likely to suffer more destructive, nitrogen-dependent brown tides this year, according to marine scientists at Cooperative Extension.

An even more positive result of increased aquaculture lies in the habitat it creates for marine life. The crates and other equipment placed underwater by aquaculture farmers serve to form artificial reefs that foster attractive living and breeding space for all manner of finfish as well as shellfish. That in turn creates an economic spinoff for the benefit of both commercial and recreational anglers.

Teddy Roosevelt, the kind of leader sorely missed these days, had a comment over 100 years ago that's worth recalling:

"A nation behaves well if it treats the natural resources as assets which it must turn over to the next generation increased, and not impaired, in value."

Given that the resource of our bay region is in overall decline, and given that shellfish farming can help in great measure to reverse this most unfortunate trend, let's see the county make a serious effort to energize aquaculture. This is where all our towns and villages on both forks can join with the Long Island Farm Bureau, an aquaculture advocate, and devote their collective strength to enormous advantage. They could then enlist the county in a concerted effort to amend the inhibiting state law and bring about a truly worthwhile lease program for aquaculture in the Peconics.